H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Winston Groom. *Vicksburg 1863*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Illustrations. x + 482 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-307-26425-1.

Reviewed by Christopher R. Waldrep (San Francisco State University)
Published on H-CivWar (July, 2009)
Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason

"Why This Happen?"

Vicksburg 1863 is the skillfully crafted work of an experienced writer. In 1978, Winston Groom published his first book, *Better Times Than These*, based on his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam. Other books have followed, and Groom most forcefully established his credentials in 1986 with a comic novel on his Vietnam experience that became a hugely successful movie: *Forrest Gump*. In *Vicksburg 1863*, Groom exhibits not only his storytelling prowess but also a delightful talent for mischievous observation. Henry Halleck is "the nervous bug-eyed military whiz" (p. 56). William Tecumseh Sherman had "zany" adventures in California before the war (p. 85). The USS *Benton* came into battle "like a bear beset by hornets" (p. 121). Groom's descriptions are clearly the work of a talented novelist: "The night was villainously dark" (p. 276). "Vicksburg twinkled along the great bluffs like a miniature galaxy" (p. 277). Such vivid characterizations and crisp sentences are the most obvious reasons to read Groom's history writing. Reviewers have generally praised Groom, one calling him "first-rate."[1]

Groom does not intend to appeal to academics or even history buffs. In a 2005 book on a different war, Groom warned readers that some of his information might be "old hat" to "those who devour every scrap of detail about the Second World War." Groom explained that he did not consider such aficionados to be his audience: "it is not for them that I write but to the average American reader." He frankly stated that he hoped readers would "take renewed pride in what our forefathers dealt with and determined to accomplish."[2] Groom has no patience for "the new liberal fad of 'moral relativism' or 'moral equivalency."' He believes, in fact, that there are good guys and bad guys, and dismisses "the fetish of self-hatred that has become so pervasive in the mainstream media and the halls of academia."[3] For its part, the "mainstream media" has called Groom's faith in moral progress "endearing but inherently ridiculous."[4]

In short, this well-written and entertaining book has no scholarly pretensions. There are no footnotes–even though the narrative is laced with juicy quotations and his earlier history books do have notes. Groom appends a three-page bibliographic essay entitled "Acknowledgements and Source Notes" that will allow curious readers to chart the limits of his bibliographic explorations but not trace the sources for specific facts and quotations. The introduction, a place where academic readers will go looking for a thesis statement, curiously only summarizes the author's genealogical connections to Vicksburg. His great-grandfather, it turns out, joined the Fourth Mississippi Cavalry which raced to the aid of Vicksburg's beleaguered defenders. Armed with that not obviously helpful knowledge, the reader plunges into a 464-page narrative. A brief argumentative passage at the end makes the case that Vicksburg was the most important battle of the war, forty times more important than Gettysburg. But that argument does not animate this narrative which aims more for detailed description than analysis. One event follows another–at one point Groom suggests that the Confederates might have marched up and captured Chicago, "not that they would have," he adds (p. 71). In this way, and perhaps only in this one way, Groom echoes the thinking of a leading academic historian of the Civil War. Unlike Groom, Edward L. Ayers eschews turning points, but like Groom, Ayers "focuses on deep contingency."[5] To that, Groom might say "Amen." The author of *Forrest Gump* knows a thing or two about contingency.

Readers will find in *Vicksburg 1863* the contingency that Ayers recognizes, but joined with the kind of national affirmation Ayers rejects. In searching for an explanation for this apparent contradiction, the Vietnam War is an obvious place to go. One critic has observed that "two landscapes loom large in the work of Winston Groom": Vietnam and the American South. These "twin

towers" prop up Groom's fiction, he writes.[6] Groom has said that there will always be an important connection between *Forrest Gump* and all his other books. There is, he explains, "a little bit of Vietnam" in many of his books. Returning from Vietnam, Groom knew his service had been honorable. Confronted by the antiwar movement, "I just kept my mouth shut."[7]

These two landscapes shape Groom's Civil War narrative just as surely, if more subtly, as they do his novels. Groom has no trouble recognizing that slavery animated southerners' march to war. He makes that clear in the first chapter of *Vicksburg 1863*. He also knows that slavery and racism were and are evils; in *Forrest Gump*, he names his main character after Nathan Bedford Forrest, nevertheless observing that "startin up that Klan thing was not a good idea–any idiot could tell you that."[8] Into that single sentence Groom incorporates both his recognition of the South's racialist past and his condemnation of it. In *Forrest Gump*, one unlikely event follows another until one soldier dying on a Vietnam battlefield pleads, "Why this happen?" and another character explains that "it is all part of a scheme of some sort."[9] No dying Confederate asks exactly that question in *Vicksburg 1863*. If one had, Groom would presumably have had to point to slavery. Slavery was "paramount" on the "list of contentions" between North and South, he writes (p. 29). Increasingly militant abolitionists bedeviled the South. John Brown–"aging and unbalanced"–infuriated white southerners (p. 30). Those white southerners mistook Lincoln for a "die-hard abolitionist" (p. 33). The "national rift over slavery" ran so deep that it split religions (p. 34). All this agitation over slavery lit the fuse leading to war. In Vietnam, Groom writes, "we was tryin to do the right thing, I guess."[10] Groom cannot say that about the South in the Civil War. In *Vicksburg 1863*, he finds no Confederate soldier asking the Vietnam question, "Why this happen?" but he comes close. A young boy asks his grandmother, the daughter of a Civil War soldier, "why did they do it, Bamaw? Why did they die?-" About Vietnam Groom can have his character answer the same question, "it was a bunch of shit."[11] He cannot bring himself to say that about Vicksburg. For that battle Bamaw answers, "I don't know, son. I supposed they'd all be dead now anyhow" (p. 458). To Vietnam, Groom can bring a brutal truth, to the Civil War, comic evasion.

In *Vicksburg 1863*, Groom recounts a string of events chaotic and even (at times) "zany," albeit with less reflection than he brought to *Forrest Gump*. Groom's determined rejection of the moral relativism that Vietnam encouraged in others may be an artifact from a different era stranded on a landscape remolded by the civil rights revolution. In his Civil War book, Ayers rejects "works of national affirmation" and "national redemption."[12] When writing about Andrew Jackson or World War II, Groom redeems and affirms national values, though finding those qualities in *Vicksburg 1863* challenges his imagination. Groom at least twice accuses Sherman of pyromania, as if some personal mental failing led him into wanton destruction. Black soldiers' service at Milliken's Bend gets brief mention, starting out with a claim that the battle "did not reflect much credit on anyone concerned" (p. 387). Black soldiers ran for their lives before triumphant Texans, he writes, saved only by the timely intervention of Union ironclads. This is one version of what happened–the version that most shortchanges black heroism on that battlefield. Other narrators have been more generous, and even Groom concedes at the end of this passage that black soldiers proved they would fight at Milliken's Bend. He also repeats the old canard, made famous by Ken Burns, that Vicksburg did not celebrate the Fourth of July for eighty-five years after the war. Groom trips over that perennial bugaboo for white southerners: Reconstruction. Reconstruction is clearly not a topic of great interest for this author, but he mentions it at the end, complaining that by early 1867, "the Radical Republicans had begun to enact severe Reconstruction measures designed to divest many southerners of their property" (p. 440). There are few professional historians working today still deluded by the old idea that "Radicals" ever controlled Congress or any part of Reconstruction or that Reconstruction was ever "severe."

Groom concludes with a patriotic salute to all Civil War soldiers: "They were not Gods, nor were they saints, but in their time they were giants who ruled the earth, and they feared not. No army as yet assembled could have matched them" (p. 458). Here we have moral positivism, not relativism–the kind of thinking that insists on clearly defined bad guys and good guys, combined with a recognition that southern soldiers (those fearless giants) fought for slavery.

Notes

[1]. Michael A. Ross, "'Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans' Draws Jackson as Daring Dazzling Man in Full," review of *Patriotic Fire*, by Winston Groom, *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, July 30, 2006.

[2]. Winston Groom, *1942: The Year That Tried Men's Souls* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005), xiv.

[3]. Winston Groom, "Hatchet Job in 'The War': Criticisms of the World War II Documentary Are More Ex-

amples of Growing 'Moral Relativism,"' *Mobile Register*, October 14, 2007.

[4]. John Leo, "'Forrest Gump' and His Message the Movie Serves Up a Box of Chocolates and Moral Values," *Charleston Daily Mail*, August 3, 1994.

[5]. Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: Norton, 2003), xx.

[6]. Nicholas Proffitt, "Bad Dreams in the American South," review of *Gone the Sun*, by Winston Groom, *Washington Post*, December 13, 1988.

[7]. Roy Hoffman, "Novelist as Historian: 'Gump' Author Explores Year of American Anger," *Newhouse News Service*, May 19, 2005.

[8]. Groom, *Forrest Gump* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1986), 3.

[9]. Ibid., 58, 62.

[10]. Ibid., 204.

[11].Ibid.

[12]. Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: Norton, 2004), xx.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Christopher R. Waldrep. Review of Groom, Winston, *Vicksburg 1863*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24781

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.